

Sermon 62: 1 Corinthians 16:5-12: A Man on a Mission

OUTLINE

The Lord's work
The Lord's will
The Lord's workers

INTRODUCTION

We are familiar with the saying: a man on a mission. We use would this saying to describe someone who is focus determined and busy about his business. Paul is the quintessential man on a mission. But not just any mission, he is a man on God's mission. We have come to the end of the doctrinal part of this epistle to the closing sections which usually consist of travel plans and greetings, but even here there is much that we can learn. A person's travels and future plans can tell you much about their priorities. Paul was not a tourist seeking to suck the marrow out of life; no he was the Lord's servant, totally given, a man who would serve the Lord anywhere, anytime, anyone, whatever the cost. We lose sight of what it looks like to be consecrated to God, but Paul's journeys are a helpful reminder that we are here for a reason, that we are not our own. Today as we consider Paul talking about his travel plans to the Corinthians church we will divide this section up under three headings, we will see that Paul a man on a mission is dedicated to the Lord's work; submitted to the Lord's will; and committed to the Lord's workers.

The Lord's work

V5-7a, 'I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you.' What keeps you busy? For most of us, it is work; if you have young kids you might find yourself living the life of mom's taxi; if you have ill health you will be making regular visits to the doctor, the pharmacy, the hospital. For Paul, every decision, every step, every place visited, his whole life revolved around doing the will of the Lord. Think for a moment with me about your plans for the next year, the next five years, the next ten years. What are the driving concerns that lie behind those plans? For most of us it will be things like family, work, holidays. And it is good for us to be responsible and plan for the future, but please notice how everything Paul plans revolves around the Lord's work. I guess what confronts me as I consider Paul's mindset and plans is that singlemindedness of doing gospel. Granted he is a single man called to be an apostle and has forsaken the cares of this life to be more available for the things of the Lord. But his drive, his focus, his living in light of the truths of sin, judgement, eternity and Christ as the only hope of salvation are convicting. To see a man give it all, his singleness, his money, his security, his health, his reputation, even his life to see the gospel of life come to the lost and the church edified is a convicting and galvanizing thing.

Paul is writing from Ephesus, this will end up being a three year stay, he tells us here in v9 that he has a wife open door for ministry. That is why he is there. He is lingering because God is profiting the work. But he will soon travel, why? You will remember that he has the poor in Jerusalem on his heart and is conducting a coordinated giving on the part of the Gentile churches to the needy saints in

Judea. So he makes plans to go to Macedonia, this area includes the churches of Philippi; Thessalonica and Berea. He will go to these churches to collect funds for the poor. He indicates that he will only pass through there because he hopes to spend time in Corinth. Perhaps spending the winter there. Winter was a treacherous time to travel the seas so many did not travel in winter. Because Paul did not allow the Corinthians to pay him a salary he would likely work as a tent maker; Corinth being a coastal town and a main port for ships would likely offer plenty of trade in making and mending sails. You will notice that Paul mentions that he expects the Corinthians to help him on his way. The apostles leaned upon the churches for the ability to travel, whether it was the hospitality that hosted these roaming evangelists; or the money, supplies and travelling companions necessary to go to the next place that needed to hear the gospel. Paul does not ask but tells, indicating that every local church has a part to play in supporting missions, whether it is hosting and hospitality when they visit, or if it is in providing the money, supplies and companions necessary to the task.

But please notice that Paul seeks to come to Corinth, not just to see them in passing but with the hope of spending time with them. It is obvious why he wants to spend time with them, they are a church filled with troubles, divisions, sexual immorality, idolatry, disruptions in the worship service at the Lord's table; women's dress; and the gifts. As well as some denying bodily resurrection. Paul talks about being in labour pains for the Galatians due to them being troubled by false teachers, and 'the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches,' 2 Cor. 11:28. Paul does end up making an emergency visit to Corinth where he has to put out fires and address sins; this caused deep sorrow. Paul leaves and commits to a third visit where he fears will he will have to come with a stick and not a carrot again, 2 Cor. 12:20-21. Technically 1 Corinthians is the second letter to Corinth, and 2 Corinthians is the fourth letter to them; the first and third are mentioned 1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 2:4. This history of letters and travels is all aimed at helping a sinful church become pure, this is what drives Paul's agenda.

Paul reminds me of John Wesley and his dedication to the work of the Lord. Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church was a relentless minister for the Lord. He ministered for 53 years from his conversion and his regiment was brutal. He would wake up at four every morning and was often preaching his first sermon by 5 am. He is credited with travelling about 400 000 kilometers on horseback, he ended up making his sermons and composing his famous hymns on horseback. That is more than ten times around the circumference of the earth. He preached about 2-5 times a day, and is credited with having preached 40 000 sermons in his lifetime, often to massive crowds in the open air. Wesley sought to give it all for God and is credited with the words, "'Do all the good you can... to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.' As did Jonathan Edwards, as a young man he wrote a number of resolutions, here are two, "'Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can. Resolved: to live with all my might while I do live."

Why this resolve? Because this is simply imitating God's own resolve and dedication in His work to save us. God is single minded in the pursuit of saving His people. From eternity past He has planned it; all of history is working up to the grand event of Christ who would secure it. If we are amazed at men travelling great distances to bring the word of life to others and marvel at those who gladly give their lives for others, those who commit every second and every effort to service; then we must reserve our greatest adoration for the one who left heaven's glories who served without fail and paid the highest price suffering

the very wrath of God to save sinners. Paul pours himself out for others because this is what Christ has done for him.

The Lord's will

V7b-9, 'if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.' Paul is decisive and competent but ultimately he is a man in submission to God's will. We are familiar with this statement, 'if the Lord will'; you might have seen the letters D.V. for the Latin Deo Volente, which means the same thing. It is not pious verbiage thrown into Christian speech but reveals a biblical worldview. We are not the forgers of our own fate; we are not God; we do not shape reality by the power of our wills and determination. We are creatures, and there is only one God who is over all things and His plans are irresistible. As Christians we are those who used to resist His will and question how He ruled His universe and brought His will to pass. But we have seen our sin, we have seen our folly and our finitude and now we recognize that He alone is right and competent; whose every decision is perfection and worthy of praise.

This is a statement that reveals that we are under duty to do what is right but the results are left with the Lord. Prov. 16:9, 'The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.' So this means that we might commit a lot of time and resources to an effort that we think is good but does not yield the hoped for fruit because God has other plans; or His plan is for our faithfulness in loss not in plenty, we are the Lord's; He knows best; we submit, and gladly.

This statement reveals that God has given us commands that we are to obey, but He has not given us a full description of every aspect of His secret will, there will be things that we don't know. Here on the earth we have a worm's eye view and may have to live by faith without a full bird's eye view of things. We may have to go through a door not knowing what lies on the other side; we may have to render a costly obedience not guaranteed to be a blessing. We are the Lord's we gladly obey.

This is statement of humility that recognizes that God is the one who has the right to decide how our lives are lived, as James indicates, James 4:13, 15-16, 'Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.' We are not apathetic in our planning but we are always mindful that we are subject to God's will.

This statement also renders one malleable, because if God decides the change the situation, that is ok. You will notice that Paul is not quite sure how long he will stay in Corinth offering tentative arrangements, this is not because he is fickle or indecisive, but because he knows that God may open up some new direction that takes priority over his visit to Corinth.

We see Paul's own application of this attitude in his staying in Ephesus, even though there are opponents. It was there that Paul rebaptized the so called disciples of John the Baptist who had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. It was there that the 7 sons of Sceva attempted to cast out demons in the name of the

Christ Paul preached and failed. Ephesus was a town that was renowned for its riches; a famous temple to Artemis; and it was a center for occult learning. Paul ended spending more time here than in any other place, about three years. Here we see why, God had opened a wide door for effective work. The events with the sons of Sceva resulted in people paying attention and the gospel taking hold, Acts 19:17-20, 'And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. ¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.' We are seeing revival here where the culture of a town dedicated to the occult is having its very DNA transformed by the gospel. Paul is often happy to leave a situation in the hands of newly appointed elders in a local church but felt that he should stay to spread the word. Paul was very effective and Luke reports, Acts 19:10, 'This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.'

But this ministry was not without its problems. It is likely that the enemies Paul mentions are the silversmiths that caused a riot in Ephesus. You don't have to read far in Paul's missionary journeys before you come across the Jews dogging him from town to town, and the endless persecution that followed him. Paul would eventually be imprisoned for preaching the word, but even this did not deter his confidence in the work going forward. Paul ministered despite opposition and God still grew the work. One commentator shares a similar story from the life of the missionary John G Paton. 'While John Paton was a university student in Scotland, God called him to missionary work in the New Hebrides. After graduation he and his bride sailed to the southwest Pacific and began work among the savage cannibals on the island of Tanna. His wife and infant son died a few months later, and Paton slept on their graves for several nights to prevent the cannibals from digging up the bodies and eating them. After almost four years of faithful work he left without seeing a single convert. Many years later his son by another marriage resumed work on Tanna and eventually saw the entire island come to Christ. When the elder Paton revisited the island, the chief of the former cannibals asked the missionary who the great army was that had surrounded his hut every night when he first came among them. God's angels had protected him. Because of his faithful work and that of his son, when he left the New Hebrides for the last time, after ministering on another island as well, it is reported that he said with tearful eyes, "I don't know of one native on these islands who has not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ."

Paul was a man who trusted to the will of God, who submitted to the will of God, who endured difficulty to fulfill the will of God, but we must also appreciate that though He believed God was sovereign and His will is supreme, Paul was not passive in seeing the will of God come to pass. Paul was a big believer in prayer. Listen to Paul's exhortation to the Colossians, 4:2-4, 'Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.' Paul recognized that God's will would prevail, but this does not mean that Paul was a determinist or a fatalist, he believed that God uses means including the preaching of the word and the prayers of the saints.

The Lord's workers

V10-11, 'When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.' Ministry is not a solo sport but a team sport. Paul, though an extremely gifted individual often teamed up with others in the work of ministry. We see in the book of Acts that Paul teams up with Barnabas; Silas, Luke, John Mark; Timothy; Titus and others. Here we see that Paul is sending Timothy to Corinth. Paul is not able to come yet, and there are serious matters developing. Paul has already mentioned in 4:17 the purpose of Timothy's visit, 'That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.' I agree with John Owen that Timothy is like an Evangelist in the list of Eph. 4:11, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. Timothy and Titus are apostolic representatives acting with Paul's authority in the churches. The Corinthians are critical of Paul due to the slander of some. The tongue sets on fire the course of nature and Paul's reputation has been slandered and is under suspicion in Corinth. On top of that the Corinthians themselves who have been ministered to by Apollos have requested that Apollos come and visit them. Instead they are getting Timothy. Timothy is godly and faithful, but he is not Paul and he is young. Paul fears that he may not be well received, or that the animosity against Paul will be directed at him, so Paul asks the Corinthians to ease the way for him. Timothy should be given respect because he is doing the work of the Lord. We are biased creatures who give preference to famous people, good looking people, those we associate with success and power. Timothy might lack the finesse of Apollos, the intensity of Paul, the experience of Titus, but he is doing God's work, just as Paul is. Paul knows our weakness and tells the Corinthians not to despise him, as well as to help him on his way as they would help Paul. We live in an age of celebrity preachers. You will find preachers more gifted than your humble local church pastor; a man who has written books, who has followers, who is sought after for international conferences who has anecdotes told about him. Sadly, there are many who go online and not to church for the spiritual food; there are many who are more influenced by the personalities on line with their slick ministry platforms and use of modern tech than the shepherd that God has placed over them. We can learn from what Paul says here about Timothy to the Corinthians.

V12, 'Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.' Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew who was very proficient as a preacher. It is possible that he has a fan club in Corinth and favouritism between Paul and Apollos is a source of contention in the church, 1 Cor. 1:10-17. The Corinthians wrote to Paul to ask Apollos to visit Corinth. Paul passed on the message, and now he is letting them know that Apollos has chosen not to come. It seems that he is seeking to avoid misunderstanding showing that this is Apollos's choice not him obeying an order from Paul. Maybe Apollos knows that there is favouritism and is avoiding going to Corinth until it is resolved, or like Paul the ministry in Ephesus is too fruitful to leave.

Paul is a man on a mission, everything in his life is channeled into this primary purpose of his life. He is not living life like a tourist but as one under orders. He is fully given to the work, if it is difficult, if it involves going to far away places, if it involves persecution, the loss of his health, all of his actions and decisions can

be explained by this controlling desire to be about the Lord's business. Like John Wesley; like George Whitfield; like David Livingstone he was all about one thing. He was also submitted to the Lord's will. He was not his own, He was submitted to another. This included not knowing what tomorrow held, this included accepting good and not only difficulty in doing God's will. This did not lead to fatalism but a faithful employment of the means like preaching and prayer. And Paul was a co-labourer with others in God's work. He respected others, put forward others, defended and spoke up for others who were likewise given to this noble task. Are you a man or a woman on a mission?